

# Overcoming the frost

Bordeaux En Primeur 2017

*by Hubert Li*





*Morning view at Chateau Haut Brion.*

## Overcoming the frost

The biggest piece of news on the Bordeaux 2017 vintage is probably the frost that occurred during the early season and Bordeaux as a whole has suffered severe loss of crop. However, this is not the full story.

This is a year when great terroir makes the big difference, not only in terms the quality and composition of the soil, but the lower risks against natural disasters like frost and draught. On the left bank, vineyards along the Gironde river has benefited from the warmer winds that protected them against frost; in Pessac Leognan, vineyards like Haut Brion in the city is protected by the surrounding homes; and on the right bank, the slopes of Saint Emilion and

the plateau of Pomerol helped to channel the cold air away.

It is important to understand that the frost only affects the crop, but it does not affect the quality of the wine, and in fact those vineyards that survived the frost has produced very good to excellent wines in good volumes this year.

The 2017 vintage had a very early bud-break to start the growing cycle, but that also exposed the vines to the risk of frost and hail damage. When spring frost struck Bordeaux on the 27th and 28th April, fortunately most of the classified growths and grand cru vineyards were spared. Weather condition was favourable since then. May and June had been dry, luckily there was



rain at the end of June to rejuvenate the vineyard and helped the suffering young vines at the right time. July and August were dry and moderately hot with cool nights provided the perfect ripening conditions that shaped a quality vintage. Rain in early September is perhaps less than ideal but the skins of the cabernet got the fruit well protected. Then came a long dry period through to October to allow further concentration of grapes before harvest.

There is a general consensus that 2017 is a like a more powerful and concentrated version of the 2014 vintage, and in some cases the quality can come closer to the great 2015 vintage.

Thanks to the cool summer nights, the alcohol level is around 13.0%-14.5%, giving a much more classic style of wine, which is more expressive of the individual terroir characters. Equally impressive wines can be found on the left bank and the right bank, but the focus should be on the better terroir.

As with share placements in the stock market, you have to support your broker on some harder to move stocks to be allocated the hard-to-get ones. Accordingly, we will be buying this vintage to secure our future allocation on hard to get wines. If you want to do the same, buy selectively, and we will guarantee your allocation of the same wine for the 2018 vintage.



*Henri Lurton, owner of Chateau Brane-Cantenac, one of the outperformers in 2017.*



*Tasting at Chateau Margaux, candidate for wine of the vintage.*

## The Left Bank

Cabernet Sauvignon is the main grape varietal in many of the classified growths in the left bank, and the quality this year is very good to excellent!

Among the wines from Saint Estephe, Calon Segur (WV 93-95) has a delicate nose of black fruits with a touch of spice, and a precise palate with a cool climate character. Montrose (WV 95-97) is a bigger wine with layers of black fruits and violet aromas coming through. The fruits followed through to a big rich mid-palate with a very long finish.

Among the more elegant-styled wines of Pauillac, Pichon Lalande (WV 94-96) offers a perfumed bouquet of black fruits, floral notes and a touch of tobacco. It has a medium-full body, typical of the chateau. The level of tannins

are high but very silky. Grand Puy Lacoste (WV 92-94) is always about the balance, it's a classic Pauillac with medium-full body that you will enjoy glass after glass.

The aim for perfection continues here at Pontet Canet (WV 93-95). Owner Alfred Tesseron showed me to his new concrete vats that he has installed this year. The curved shape of the vats allow for automatic circulation of the grape juice within the tank and therefore no pumping over is needed, resulting in a finer extraction. It does not have the power as the 2016 vintage but it is an all-round performer with strong floral characters, a medium-full body and a long aftertaste.

Mouton Rothschild (WV 96-98) is a candidate for wine of the vintage again this year. The elegant and complex nose opens on wild berry aromas,



*Alfred Tesseron, owner of Chateau Pontet Canet, showing us his new vats used to produce the 2017 vintage.*

along with dried flowers and a touch of pepper. On the palate this is dense, offering layers of black fruits and with the extra sweet touch that can only be found in great years of Mouton, a similar character also found in 2009 and 2016. Clerc Milon (WV 92-94) has a lower % of merlot than usual due to drought, and its cooler terroir gave a more subdued nose, but with dense black fruits to offer on the palate. Armailhac (WV 91-93) on the other hand has a warmer terroir and therefore is a more fruity wine, a classy vintage with balanced acidity.

Leoville Lascases (WV 95-97) and Ducru Beaucaillou (WV 95-97) are once again the two most impressive Chateaux from the Saint Julien appellation. The former being very muscular and tight as usual during en primeurs,

while the latter is more fruit rich and pure, both are bigger versions of the 2014 vintage. Their second estates Clos du Marquis (WV 91-93) and Croix de Beaucaillou (WV 90-92) are also stellar performers. Leoville Poyerre (WV 93-95) is a wine to like this year, only 50% of the production from its dedicated vineyards is used in the grand vin. No surprises from the consistent performers Talbot (WV 90-92), Branaire Ducru (WV 90-92) and Beychevelle (WV 89-91).

Chateau Margaux (WV 96-98) is once again another potential wine of the vintage, no other cabernet sauvignon wine can achieve this level of elegance and precision. Thanks to the cooler summer nights, the wine carries a touch of cool climate character as found in other great vintages like 1996. Pavillon Rouge du Margaux



*Library cellar of Chateau Batailley, with wines dating back to vintage 1881.*

(WV 92-94) went through more stringent grape selection than ever before and is a wine that shines on its own.

Rauzan Segla (WV 94-96) is one of few wines that comes close in quality of with the 2016 vintage. It has a strong mid-palate, with a touch of cinnamon and spice.

Among all wines from the left bank, the biggest surprise for me this year is Brane Cantenac (WV 94-96). This wine can lack density in weaker vintages, but 2017 has charming power, a clear nose and chewy tannins. A very classy wine from the Margaux appellation, quite possibly their best vintage ever!



*The wines of Gerard Perse, of which Chateau Pavie is my highest scoring wine of the vintage.*

## Pessac Leognan

The wines from Pessac are of very high quality and can be enjoyed from early. It is always difficult to choose a favourite between Haut Brion (WV 94-96) and La Mission Haut Brion (WV 94-96), but this year I didn't find the extra power that La Mission usually possesses, perhaps the cool summer nights of the vintage has made the elegant side of La Mission to shine through more. Both wines are equally elegant with a mix of black fruits from the cabernet sauvignon and red fruits from the merlot.

Pape Clement (WV 93-95) is another classy reflection of the vintage with the black fruits and savory spices, very well balanced but it didn't quite have the power as the past two vintages. Haut Bailly (WV 94-96) has produced another classy wine with a silky smooth finish, a

very good example of the vintage characteristics. Those who followed my reports over the past few years would know that I have been very impressed with Les Carmes Haut Brion (WV 92-94) since Guillaume Poutier took over the winemaking from the 2012 vintage. It didn't blow me away this time, but it's beautifully made with intense red fruits and a very fine mid-palate. Texture of the wine is very important here and it's well executed with only gentle pressing in the tank and no pumping over at all.

Smith Haut Lafitte (WV 94-96) is a consistent performer from this area. Their red wine is full of raspberries and cherries with a touch of smoke and savory note from the flinty soil. The texture is very smooth by having gentle pressing in the tanks with no over-pumping.





*Chateau Berliquet joins Chateau Canon as properties of the Chanel Group.*

2017 has not only produced very good reds, but dry white wines too. The Smith Haut Lafitte Blanc (WV 96-98) has benefited from the warm dry summer days and cold nights to give the freshness and richness in the wine, with aromas of yellow grapefruit, citron, lime a bit of white peach. This wine is aged in 50% new oak for 12 months. The quality is even better 2015 and 2016, perhaps on par with other great vintages like their 2009.

## Right Bank

This year I have rediscovered Pavie (WV 97-99pt). Since Philippe Develay took over the management for the Gerard Perse estates two years ago, he has made changes to the winemaking recipe, with more gentle pressing and use of less than 100% new oak for the grand vin, and in 2017 the results are remarkable. Pavie remains to be a blockbuster wine, but the tannins are much finer and the terroir characters really shine through now. This is Latour of the right bank. It is no longer the controversial wine that people love to hate and I would say it is every bit a great first growth (Grand Cru Classe A), and my top scoring Bordeaux from the right bank.

I have also tasted Pavie Decesse (WV 94-96pt) and Bellevue Mondotte (WV 95-97pt), the neighbouring vineyards of Pavie, and they offer



*Vineyard map of Chateau Canon showing its various terroirs on the hilltop of Saint Emilion.*

similar characteristics at half the price, with Pavie Decesse on limestone soil with more floral character, and Bellevue Mondotte on clay soil with more punch.

Figeac (WV 92-94) sits on the border between Saint Emilion and Pomerol on gravelly soil, so this is in fact a Pomerol wearing the Saint Emilion badge. Unfortunately, they lost 40% of the crop this year due to frost, but luckily the vines on the best slopes are not affected. The fruit has great purity but perhaps a little too spicy, it lacks the structure compared to previous vintages.

The estates of Stephan Von Neipperg has also suffered major damages from the spring frost, with 65% potential production at Canon La Gaffeliere destroyed, while at Clos de L'Oratoire

70%, and d'Aiguilhe 60%. They have decided to work on a second generation of grapes, which is to prepare the damaged vines for second budding, and the result is a very late growing season for these vines, and to have these two harvests blended together. Canon La Gaffeliere (WV 91-93) retains the elegant red fruit style and has a medium body, but this is somewhat different to other wines from this vintage. La Mondotte (WV 94-96) is not affected by the frost and has produced a wine with rich vibrant red fruits and an elegant mid-palate.

Canon (WV 96-98) has become a star in Saint Emilion since the 2015 vintage, and it remains to be a top-performer under the supervision of viticulture consultant Thomas Duclos. The quality comes close to that of the 2015 and 2016



*Tasting at Chateau La Conseillante with Marielle Cazaux.*

vintages with fruit and a multi-dimensional fruit profile and impressive mid-palate and very long finish. Chanel Group has acquired Chateau Berliquet (WV 94-96) last year, the adjacent vineyard of Canon, both on the prime limestone plateau of Saint Emilion. These two wines are really not so different and this could be the best value deal of the vintage.

At Angelus (WV 94-96) the wines produced here remain consistently impressive as per previous years, with the perfect level of extraction to achieve the balance of richness of wine and smoothness of tannins. Their other property Bellevue (WV 92-94) made by 100% merlot is perhaps lesser known in this part of the world, but it is another best value pick for me this year.

I have always enjoyed the wines from Nicolas Thienpont. Larcis Ducasse (WV 93-95) is made with great precision, vibrant red fruits and a lot of spice to compliment the balance. Pavie Macquin (WV 93-95) is always more blackcurrant style by comparison and equally charming. The star from this stable has to be Beausejour (Duffau-Lagarrosse) (WV 95-97), one of the few wines matching in quality of 2015 and 2016.

La Conseillante (WV 95-97) is a star in Pomerol this year, and for the first time their board has chosen the blend made by winemaker Marielle Cazaux as final, rather than their consultant Michel Rolland. The wine has multi-layers of fruit and a unique perfumed nose that can only be found in their greatest years like 2009.

The quality of Lafleur (WV 96-98) needs no



*At Chateau La Conseillante, radish is grown in between the rows of vines to bring nitrogen to the soil.*

introduction and it delivers again this year. It strikes the perfect balance on the floral nose, the palate and the aftertaste. They also produce Pensees de Lafleur (92-94) on the clay-gravelly soils of the estate, which is dedicated only to this second cuvee.

Petrus (WV 96-98) always have this unique candied violet nose and the quality is a good continuity to the 2015 and 2016 vintages. It is unfortunate that their production is somewhat lower this year due to the smaller berries.

I follow Clinet (WV 94-96) every year simply because it's very reasonably priced for the quality. The alcohol is at 13.1%, quite a bit lower than in previous years, and this gives the real classic Bordeaux style with great freshness.

New bigger barrels have been used this year to give a slightly more delicate touch to the wine and the result is spot on.

Tasting at Jean-Pierre Moueix is always very informative in a sense it shows the quality of the vintage across the various soils on the right bank: clay, limestone and gravel. This year Belair-Monange (WV 96-98) is simply outstanding with big complex structure and is a wine to follow in the years to come, the vineyard sits on the top of the limestone plateau, the best part of Saint Emilion. More subtle blueberries and red fruits can be found in the wines of Pomerol and I would rate Trotanoy (WV 95-97) and La Fleur Petrus (WV 95-97) on par, followed closely by the red fruit rich Hosanna (WV-94-96).



## Is 2017 vintage a good deal?

The overall quality of this vintage is a 2014+, or a 2015-, and the quality is consistent among the more famous chateaux. I would expect 10% to 20% drop in release prices from the 2016 vintage in Euro terms, but for us in Hong Kong, the Euro has strengthened 10% against the HK dollar from same time last year, hence this is unlikely to be a vintage we can find a lot of immediate bargains. However, I do believe that there will be attractive deals to be found, especially from chateaux that are improving in quality.

Since the 2009 vintage the top chateaux are all holding back more and more stock to sell in future at a higher price. We are now seeing wine prices rise across the board as a result of this reduced wine supply for the market, and I foresee

that wine prices will continue to rise without any speculation factors. Short term gains from buying en primeurs is unlikely but by the time they hit the market in two years, wine prices would probably have made another leap, so if there are wines you particularly like to follow, or if you would like to buy large formats, it is a good idea to buy them during en primeurs.

## My recommendations

2017 is a vintage where very good to excellent wines can be found from every appellation. Among the wines I have tasted, I have ranked them as follows:

### The Left Bank

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- Mouton Rothschild, Pauillac 96-98pt
- Margaux, Margaux 96-98pt
- Leoville Lascases, St Julien 95-97pt
- Ducru Beaucaillou, St Julien 95-97pt
- Montrose, Saint Estephe 95-97pt
- Pichon Lalande, Pauillac 94-96pt
- Brane Cantenac, Margaux 94-96pt
- Rauzan Segla, Margaux 94-96pt
- Haut Brion, Pessac 94-96pt
- La Mission Haut Brion, Pessac 94-96pt
- Haut Bailly, Pessac 94-96pt
- Smith Haut Lafitte, Pessac 94-96pt

As Robert Parker no longer rates en primeurs, we will be sharing scores from other popular wine critics for your reference. For those who have been following our en primeur offers in the past, we will continue to offer you the best deals!

### The Right Bank

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- Pavie, Saint Emilion 97-99pt
- Petrus, Pomerol 96-98pt
- Lafleur, Pomerol 96-98pt
- Belair-Monange, Saint Emilion 96-98pt
- Beausejour, Saint Emilion 96-98pt
- Canon, Saint Emilion 96-98pt
- La Conseillante, Pomerol 95-97pt
- Troplong Mondot, Saint Emilion 95-97pt
- Trotanoy, Pomerol 95-97pt
- La Fleur Petrus, Pomerol 95-97pt
- Hosanna 94-96pt
- Angelus, Saint Emilion 94-96pt
- Clinet, Pomerol 94-96pt
- Larcis Ducasse, Saint Emilion 94-96pt
- Berliquet, Saint Emilion 94-96pt



*At Chateau Carmes Haut Brion, each year they invite an artist to decorate one of their vats.*



## Appendix – How I Taste En Primeurs

Over the years I have been asked many times how I judge the quality of a wine during en primeurs tasting, and I am happy to share with you my process here.

When I approach a wine, I would first look at the wine colour, and often a deeper, more opaque wine indicates higher concentration.

On the nose, you can find blackcurrants, red fruits, cherries, spices, dark chocolates, tobacco and many other flavours, but these are only a matter of style that cannot be used to

judge the quality of the wine, what I look for here are hints of faults or greenness that may indicate an under-ripe wine. Some wines can be closed at the time of tasting and these would be more difficult to assess.

The palate is the key to the quality and what separates a great wine from a good wine is the impression on entry, the size of the mid-palate, the smoothness of tannins, the length of the aftertaste, and how well balanced these elements are to shape the wine.



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